

For Art's Sake

'A brilliant idea not properly thought through. It seemed like a good idea at the time.' These two expressions will resonate with many, including me.

In Willsgrove, after school, Peter and I would be left alone with the servants, while the girls returned to the city for various extra-curricular activities. Upon enquiring what they were up to, I discovered my cousin Jean was a pupil at the Elaine Archibald School of Ballet. She told me the dance school needed more boys, as the girls outnumbered them by over ten to one.

I was interested, but for all the wrong reasons. Ten to one? I could work with those numbers. Where else could you find such a favourable ratio, except perhaps at an old age home? Indulging my newfound interest in ballet, my mother bought me a pair of black ballet shoes. She enrolled me at the dance studio in the old sandstone building on the corner of Main Street and Tenth Avenue. A flight of stairs at the Tenth Avenue entrance led to the first floor, where the dance studio shared the landing with one other unoccupied large room.

From the beginning, my plans went awry. I discovered just before my first lesson my cousin Jean had given up ballet. Now, I had no one to introduce me to the girls. A daunting experience, as I was ten years old and entering my shy years. Too late to back out, I thought I'd give it a go. You never know, do you?

I'm sure Elaine Archibald was pleased to find another boy enrolling. Mr Sinclair, her husband, gave me a receipt for the tuition fee. Full-length mirrors covered the dance studio walls, and the practise barre covered three walls of the large room. Elaine Archibald stood in the centre, calling out the exercises as about fifteen or more of us contorted our bodies to comply. Now and then, she'd walk across to someone and correct their stance or movement. I got the impression ballet tried to mould the body to its unnatural demands, which I found uncomfortable.

During breaks, I chatted with the three other boys in the class. Yet weeks later, I still hadn't spoken to a single girl. Then, all too soon, the dance school's annual performance in the Large City Hall was announced. After weeks of practising the Sailor's Hornpipe, we got as far as having our sailors' costumes made.

I'd not realised I would be expected to take part in a public performance, and didn't relish the idea. A poor time for me to discover I was not a natural performer. Mercifully, only days before the show, one of Bulawayo's frequent polio epidemics came around, causing the show to be cancelled.

As one of only four boys in the class, I couldn't remain anonymous, my preferred state, among so many girls. Ironically, I often spoke with one older girl (young lady) who noticed me and made a point of offering encouraging words. If I'd been so inclined, Dawn Summerton, the school's principal dancer, would have been my inspiration. Only when I saw her dance did I appreciate the skill and athleticism of ballet.

The three other boys from the class, Desmond Kelly, Kenneth Yeatman, and Dudley Van Loggerenberg, all became successful ballet dancers in the UK. But I was an imposter, not destined for a glittering career on London stages. My ballet career lingered for a few more

weeks because I was reluctant to break the news of my waning interest. But by this stage, I'm sure Elaine Archibald and Dawn Summerton realised I wasn't made of the right stuff.

One afternoon, I noticed activity in the unoccupied large room next to the dance school entrance. The doors stood wide open, and a strong-looking man was busy setting up the floor with enormous, padded, white mats. He explained he was opening a judo school to teach self-defence. This was more like it! I decided on the spot to transfer my fees from the dance studio to the judo school.

There was no grand departure from the dance studio. Rather, it was a slinking away through a drying up of tuition fees. One Sunday afternoon, a few weeks later, I bumped into Dawn Summerton at the Hillside Dams. She commented she'd not seen me at the dance studio recently. I said, 'I'm thinking of giving up ballet.' My mother, who was with me, said, 'You're not thinking of giving up ballet. You have given up ballet.' That, if anything, was my official farewell.

The judo school instructor provided the white judo coats, and I didn't need to buy shoes as the training was bare foot. Better yet, the dance studio and judo school entrances were only feet apart. That meant I could chat with the girls if ever summoned up the courage.

But even the best laid plans have their flaws. The judo school and dance studio schedules didn't coincide, and I seldom saw any girls coming or going. And soon, I realised, throwing the large instructor about the mat had nothing to do with my strength or judo skills, but more to do with his selfless cooperation. The judo school also proved to be rather lonely, with only one or two other trainees. A complete contrast to the dance studio.

For me, the judo school and the dance studio shared one common problem; both required commitment. Being tied to a schedule did not suit me. It was time to return to my roots, exploring the bush with Peter behind the house in Willsgrove.